

# Unravelling Debussy

**ROGER NICHOLS** *welcomes an incisive biography*



## CLAUDE DEBUSSY

**Paul Roberts**

Phaidon

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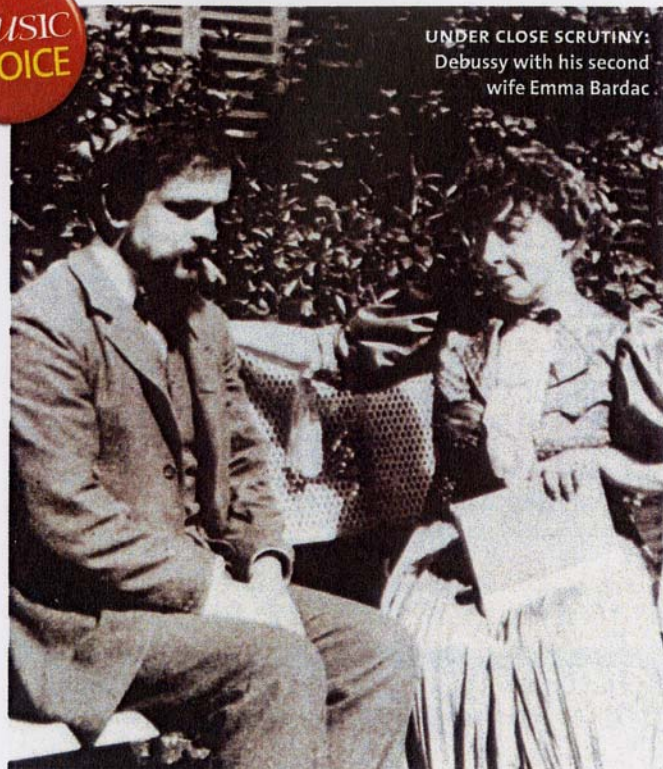
Debussy proclaimed on one occasion that his life was as simple as a blade of grass. Well, even the greatest composers write tosh from time to time. Simple Debussy was not. Indeed, being the mixed-up person he was undoubtedly lent some of his music its depth and mystery.

Paul Roberts meets the challenges of both person and music with empathy and acumen. In his Preface he identifies the 'polarized demands of the intellect and the senses' as crucial to the composer's development, a dilemma that seems to have come to a head just before the First World War, when Debussy complained of being threatened by his own 'mandarin' prowess as a manufacturer of notes. Roberts

is especially good on the influence of the visual arts upon this most eye-minded of composers, and it's good to see Pierre Louÿs (author of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*) given credit for his staunchness as a friend in difficult times. The composer's links with Baudelaire are also intelligently explored and I treasure the extract from the poet's critique of Delacroix ('the whole visible universe is nothing but a storehouse of images and signs...') which, in its emphasis on the role of imagination, is very close to Debussy's world.

As for the composer's writings, these are rather like *La mer* in that there's nearly always an undercurrent or two that needs probing. Here again Roberts is both sharp and sensible, never spinning off into the wilder flights this composer has sometimes inspired – his analysis on p210 of Debussy's letter about his second wife, Emma Bardac, is particularly incisive.

I'm not sure he has quite made up his mind over Debussy's father's attitude to his early abandonment of the lucrative virtuoso path, and I would go rather with his statement that 'when he [Debussy] surveyed the world... he saw he did not fit' than with a previous description of him as an 'insider'. Also I'm not



**UNDER CLOSE SCRUTINY:**  
Debussy with his second wife Emma Bardac

convinced Debussy was 'deeply impressed' by Stravinsky's *Firebird*: when Stravinsky brought him the piano duet version of *Rite of Spring* a couple of years later and asked for an honest opinion of his first ballet, the maître replied, 'Well, dear boy, one has to start somewhere!' But I prize Roberts's ability to seize on

the things that so nearly might have happened: what if, for example, he had not won the necessary Conservatoire prize in 1880 and had been expelled? Generous quotations from letters and memoirs support this elegantly written volume.

★★★★★